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China's Airborne Forces (U)



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CHINA'S AIRBORNE FORCES (U)

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PREFACE

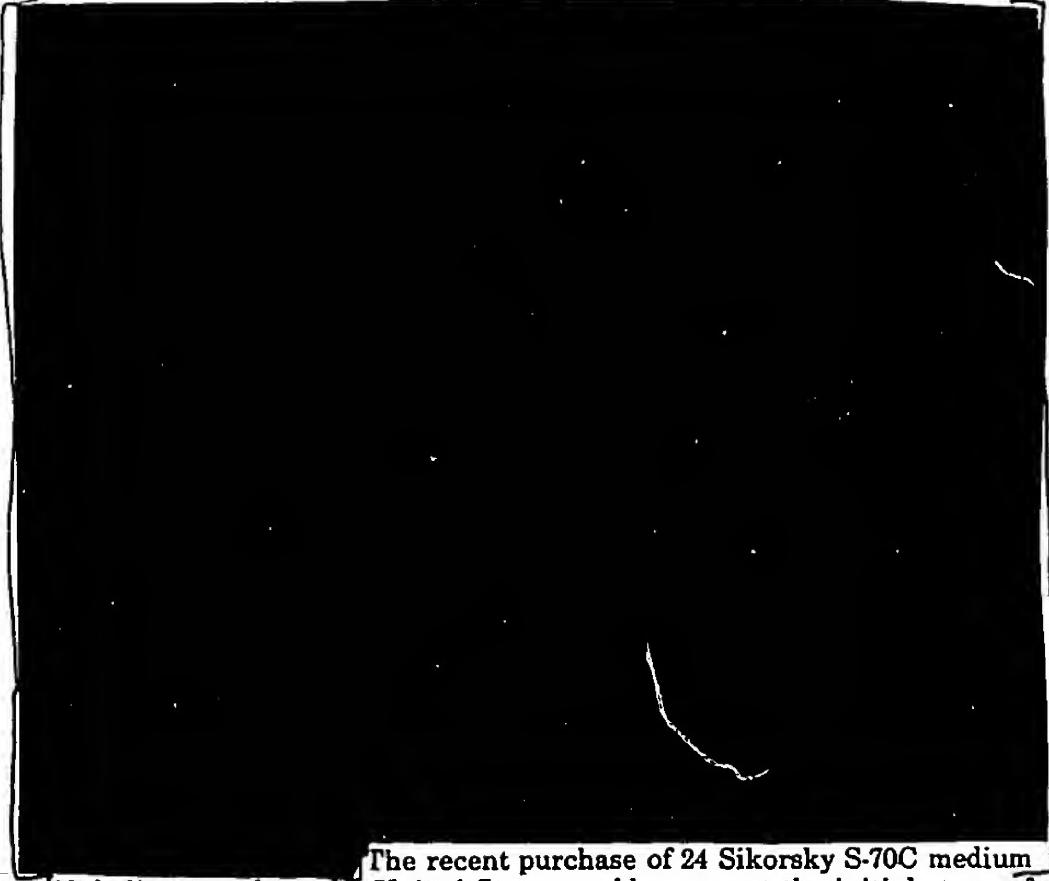
(U) This study provides a current analysis of the organization, equipment, training, and missions of China's airborne forces. A primary emphasis has been placed on an assessment of the capability of China's airborne forces to accomplish their missions. Selected sections of this study also provide a useful reference of Chinese airborne equipment and transport aircraft. A brief examination of China's airlift capabilities is provided, which includes a graphic that allows a consumer to calculate the airlift capabilities for any unit or combined force in China to distances in excess of 3,000 NM.

(U) The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance provided by [REDACTED]

(U) Each classified title or heading in this report has been properly marked; all those unmarked are unclassified.

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SUMMARY



The recent purchase of 24 Sikorsky S-70C medium lift helicopters from the United States could represent the initial stage of a serious Chinese attempt to establish an airmobile capability.

The capabilities and missions of China's airborne forces will continue to gradually expand as China begins to improve its dedicated airlift capability, airborne training, and organic firepower. The modernization of the airborne forces will continue to focus on the qualitative improvement of its forces rather than expanding their size and organization.

1. FORCE STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

a. Background

[REDACTED] The origin of China's airborne forces can be traced to 1949, when the Chinese established an airborne command in Beijing with the assistance of the Soviet Union. A number of paratroop training facilities subsequently were created and staffed, in part, by former Chinese Nationalist Army airborne personnel who had defected or were captured during China's Civil War.

[REDACTED] The first airborne unit in the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) was identified in 1952 at Kaifeng in Wuhan Military Region (MR). This unit was designated the 1st Airborne Division and, by the early 1960s, increasing airborne activity in Yingshan and Huangpi indicated that two additional airborne divisions also existed in Wuhan MR. Although all these early airborne units were believed to be under the command of the Xiaogan Airborne Authority; their true numerical designators could never firmly be established.

[REDACTED] Also in the early 1960s, the 15th Army, an infantry army with extensive combat experience in the Korean War, was reorganized as an airborne army, subordinate to the People's Liberation Army Air Force Headquarters in Beijing. By the late 1960s, it had become evident that despite the change in the 15th Army's function and subordination, its three organic divisions — the 29th, 44th, and 45th — had retained their numerical designators and were, with the exception of the 29th Division, the earlier referenced divisions under the command of the Xiaogan Airborne Authority. The disposition of the 29th division was not clear, but it is possible that elements of this division merged with the original 1st Airborne Division at Kaifeng to create the new 43d Division.

[REDACTED] The 15th Airborne Army and its subordinate divisions, the 43d, 44th, and 45th remained at Kaifeng, Yingshan, and Huangpi until 1967, when the Cultural Revolution erupted in violence in Wuhan MR. Elements of the 15th Airborne Army, parachuted into Wuhan in July of 1967 to restore public order and secure vital military and civil facilities. During this same period, they also gained experience in air drop-

ping supplies and paratroops over flooded areas of central China, as well as performing internal security duties in Wuhan city. These airborne units returned to their former installations by 1970.

[REDACTED] Beijing began measures to upgrade the airborne forces following their involvement in the Cultural Revolution.

2. AIRBORNE DOCTRINE AND MISSIONS

China's national defense policy has strongly influenced the adoption of Soviet airborne doctrine, as well as the types of military equipment, aircraft, and weaponry that are available to China's airborne forces. Since 1960, PLAAF airborne doctrine has been broadened to include heliborne and airlanded operations, which add flexibility, mobility, range, and firepower to existing PLAAF parachute delivery doctrine. The recent Soviet development in parachute delivery techniques, airlanded and heliborne tactics, as well as the employment of US airmobile operations in Vietnam, have provided the PLAAF with examples of advanced airborne techniques.

a. Doctrine

PLAAF airborne doctrine includes three methods of air delivery: paratroop, heliborne, and airlanded operations.³ All are constrained by a limited Chinese airlift capability. The use of aircraft and helicopters is a solution to the problem of troop movements within China because of the inherent rail and road network limitations that can hinder the rapid deployment of reserve forces to conflict areas.

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Figure 5. (U) Chinese Paratroop Operation.

PLAAF heliborne operations are probably based on Soviet doctrine and the US military experience in Vietnam.

In performing an internal security role, a Chinese heliborne force would enjoy a marked advantage over paratroopers in flexibility, mobility, and control (figure 6).

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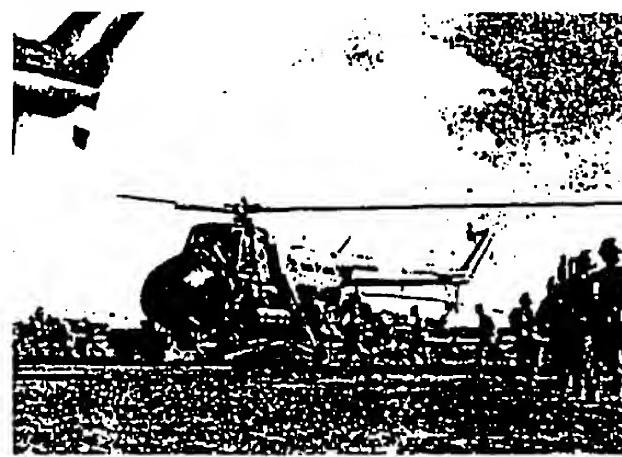


Figure 6. (U) Chinese Heliborne Operation.

PLAAF airlanded operations, like paratroop operations, are hindered by the critical lack of dedicated transport aircraft. Certain types of aircraft, although best suited for civilian transport roles, could be converted for military use.

b. Missions

China's airborne forces can be employed to conduct a range of limited objective missions in support of overall PLA operations within China. For example, elements of the 15th Airborne Army could be utilized to reinforce the Urumqi area in the event of a Soviet attack on West-

ern China. This type of combat mission might include PLAAF airborne assault landings to harass enemy rear areas. This would include attacks on lines of communication and supply, disruption of the enemy movement of its reserves as reinforcements, and reconnaissance and intelligence gathering activities. In this role, airborne forces could also disrupt enemy offensive combat preparations through the destruction of occupied airfields, supply depots, communication centers, and the existing transportation infrastructure.

The airborne forces in the PLAAF can also be deployed as special forces or air commandos.

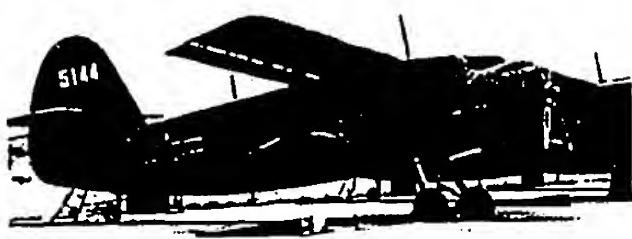


Figure 7. (U) Chinese Y-5/COLT Transport.

The 15th Airborne Army could also be employed in a land-based light infantry role although it would forfeit the tactical advantage it enjoys as an airborne force. Any PLAAF airborne unit used in a light infantry role, would be a weak adversary against any fully equipped enemy force of similar size.

than most airborne units of Western nations.

The use of the 15th Airborne

Army in an internal security role during the Cultural Revolution suggests that Beijing may still consider this as a viable mission for the airborne forces.

PLAAF airborne units could also be effective in alleviating disruptions caused by Soviet penetrations into rear areas during a major conflict with China.

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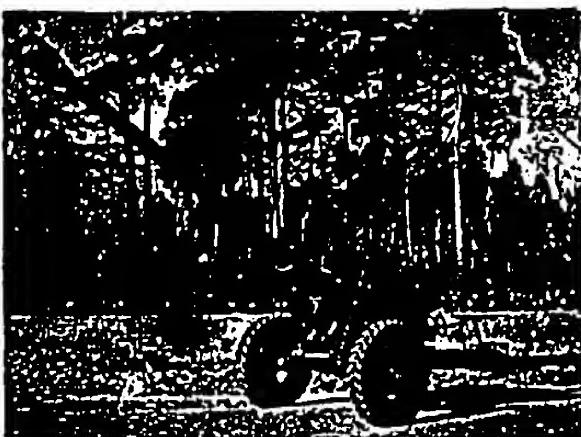


Figure 8. (U) Chinese Recoilless Gun Unit.

If the future combat capability of the airborne forces is to improve, the Chinese must begin to deploy modern air defense systems that are both effective and easily deliverable by air.

The PLAAF will not achieve this capability for some time since the Chinese possess few heavy lift helicopters in their inventory.

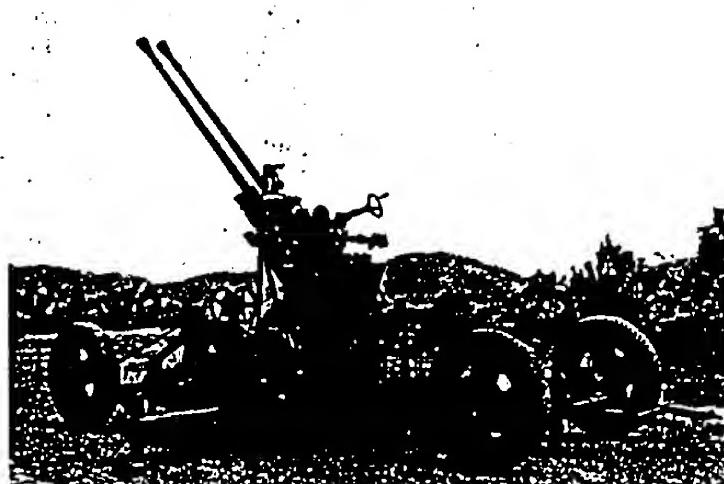
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Type 56 85-mm Field Gun



Type 63 107-mm MRL



Type 65 37-mm AAA Gun



Hongying 5 Tactical SAM

Figure 9. (U) Chinese Airborne Equipment.

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Type 65 82-mm Recoilless Gun



Type 69 40-mm Grenade Launcher



Hongjian 73 ATGM



Type 50 Flamethrower

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Figure 10. (U) Chinese Type 112 Parachute.

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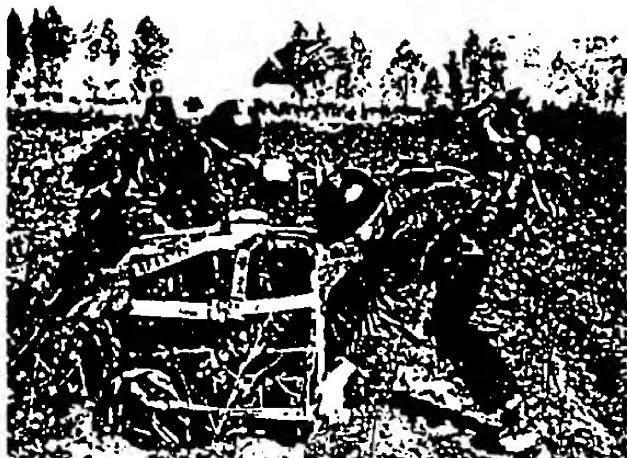


Figure 11. (U) Chinese Cargo Parachutes.

4. TRAINING

a. Individual Training

All Chinese airborne paratroopers attend a 6-month training course at the airborne training school in Kaifeng. This training is designed to produce an airborne soldier capable of performing a variety of roles during combat operations. The preliminary phase of airborne training, which is similar to infantry basic training, consists of basic military subjects, weapons training, commands, and political education. A later stage of more specialized training includes squad, platoon, and company drills. It emphasizes cover and concealment, reconnaissance, raid and destruction, mountain warfare, combat in rear areas, and advanced weapons training. This stage also provides training in unarmed combat, demolitions, communications, and ground combat tactics.

The final stage of basic training consists of 4 weeks of parachute jumping, instruction in the theory of parachuting, and packing the main and reserve parachutes. This parachute instruction is concluded with training jumps from a tower and 10-15 technical training jumps from An-26/CURLs or Y-8/CUBs. After basic training, individual soldiers join their assigned units and are required to complete two additional parachute jumps during airborne exercises.

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Figure 12. (U) Night Airborne Operation.

b. Unit Training

There has been a steady increase in the frequency and sophistication of airborne training in the 15th Airborne Army since the Cultural Revolution. Prior to that period, PLAAF parachute training operations were primarily conducted by the 43d Airborne Division and consisted of simple daytime jumps involving a small number of troops and supplies. The largest airborne exercise in China before 1967 was in Fuzhou MR, and involved approximately 45 transport aircraft that flew at altitudes of 800 meters.

Although this type of training suggests progress in the frequency and sophistication of PLAAF airborne operations, the shortage of available Chinese medium-range air-transport will continue to limit airborne participation in these training exercises to the regimental level.

Although the Chinese may not develop Western airmobile tactics in the near future, PLAAF training will continue to emphasize heliborne assault and the airmobile insertion of troops in support of airborne operations.

5. AIR TRANSPORT CAPABILITY

a. Fixed Wing

Fixed-wing air transport support for the 15th Airborne Army is provided primarily by the 13th Air Transport Division and a transport squadron that are based near airborne force garrisons in Wuhan MR.

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Figure 14. (U) Chinese Medium-Range Transports.

China's overall airlift capabilities are seriously limited by the lack of medium-range transports and the total lack of any long-range transports.

Moreover, the small cargo and troop capacity of these aircraft would hamper Chinese combat operations by requiring a larger number of Air Force transports and a high sortie rate, even if used only within China.

The capabilities and missions of the Chinese airborne forces will continue to gradually expand as China begins to improve its dedi-

cated airlift capability, airborne training, and organic firepower. The modernization of the airborne forces will continue to focus on the qualitative improvement of its forces rather than expanding their size and organization. This development will probably continue for the foreseeable future with increased emphasis on airborne training, which will primarily focus on the increased participation of airborne units in joint service operations.

